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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: IMAM HATIP SCHOOLS AGAIN ON AKP AGENDA?

REF: A. ANKARA 1104

[1](#)B. 04 ANKARA 2663

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady for reasons 1.4(b,d)

[1](#)1. (U) SUMMARY: Turkey's imam hatip schools (IHS) are again drawing attention in light of a new Justice and Development Party (AKP) proposal to enable IHS students to complete grades 6-8 in IHS versus state schools. This follows closely behind the recent regulation that abolished the university entrance exam coefficient for IHS graduates who want to study in departments other than theology (REF A). The new proposal will attract renewed criticism from secularist circles who accuse AKP of advancing an Islamist agenda. It may also complicate the GOT's progress on EU education reforms if, as critics warn, the number of female students decreases. END SUMMARY.

Islamist Movement's "Backyard"

[1](#)2. (U) Imam hatip schools (IHS) are vocational high schools that were originally developed to train future imams or Imam Hatip school teachers (REF B). Their curricula require students to take obligatory religious courses and only offer science, math, and humanities courses as electives. Graduating students are required to take the centralized university entrance exam. In 1997 the Turkish military staged a "post-modern" coup against the Islamic-oriented Government of PM Erbakan, who had supported imam hatip schools and had described them as the Islamist movement's "backyard." One result was that the Higher Education Council (YOK) decided to make it harder for IHS graduates to enter universities (except to study theology) by reducing their university entrance scores compared to other non-IHS graduates.

[1](#)3. (C) The new law which AKP proposed and passed abolished the reduction in IHS graduates scores on the university entrance exam (REF B). The law has leveled the playing field for all university aspirants and increased the popularity of the IHS among Islamic-oriented, low-income and less-educated families -- many of which are AKP supporters. Some secularists contend that this will pave the way for the Ministry of Education to legitimize the opening of more imam hatip schools. The Imam Hatip Alumni Association's chairman, Yusuf Ziyaeddin Sula, has stated that with YOK's lifting the coefficient practice, the number of enrolling students has dramatically increased. Sula added that in Istanbul alone the number has tripled. He suggested that the number of schools should be increased in order to meet the demand.

Some critics view these developments as decidedly negative, predicting that the eventual result will be more university graduates with IHS backgrounds finding key positions in the government, perpetuating Islamist-oriented parties.

Two Steps Forward, One Step Back?

¶4. (U) After the 1997 "post-modern" coup in 1997, Turkey improved its education system by increasing the requirement for compulsory elementary education from five years to eight years thereby integrating five years of elementary education with three years of middle-school education. This reform is known as eight years of "uninterrupted" compulsory education. With this reform, three years of IHS middle school were integrated into the state primary education system, therefore decreasing the number of years of IHS education. The new system made parents accountable for sending their children to schools for a longer period of time. The results were impressive. According to Ministry of Education statistics, the number of students who attended primary schools since 1997 increased from 84.7 percent to 97.4 percent. The number of female students who attended primary schools since 1997 increased from 79 percent to 96.1 percent. After the regulation requiring eight years of education was put in place, the number of students who dropped out of school decreased from 782,000 to 270,000. During the same period, the number of female students who dropped out of school decreased from 400,000 to 190,000.

¶5. (C) The AKP's latest proposal plan, however, may undo this

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progress. AKP MP Mehmet Saglam, the chairman of Committee on National Education in the parliament, told us that the AKP plans to propose changing the eight years uninterrupted compulsory education into its old form: five years of primary education plus three years of middle school education. Although their hope is to keep the eight years of compulsory education in place, their proposal is not finalized and this important detail is not yet assured. This change seems aimed at increasing the number of years of IHS education, by permitting IHS to operate their middle schools, which it has been prohibited from doing since 1997. If the planned proposal will not ensure the continuation of the eight years compulsory education, some critics contend that switching back to the old system may end up making the middle school education optional. They warn that this may reintroduce a discriminatory element for female students. Parents who live in rural areas may decide to have their daughters receive the minimum compulsory education. They may choose instead to have their daughters work on their farms, as was a trend in the past.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: The AKP proposal is still in its early stages, and may be scuttled if it prompts enough of an outcry from educators. Even so, secularist critics will certainly point to this proposal as more evidence that the AKP is resolute on pursuing an Islamist agenda, with imam hatip graduates as their preferred instruments. If the new proposal is approved and does not ensure the continuation of the number of compulsory education years, it would likely complicate Turkey's progress on EU education reforms -- not least because of an overall decline, as projected, in education years for rural women in Turkey.

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